

By Theresa Vargas

On an entryway table in Alicie Callaham's Upper Marlboro house are photos of her children and three simple objects that speak to how life has changed since her sons were in a car accident earlier this year.

A set of drumsticks bears the name of her 21-year-old son, David, who was killed. A "welcome home" sign was placed there for her 19-year-old son, Daniel, who survived but is now a quadriplegic. And a glass figurine carries a prayer that she says she's needed. It begins: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change."

"I need God to give me strength because I'm really not doing good," said Callaham, a 56-year-old paralegal. "I'm sad in the morning, and I'm sad in the evening."

The grief is there when she goes to use the vacuum cleaner and realizes David was the only one who knew how to work it. And it's there when she looks at the lawn and recalls that Daniel used to cut it.

Standing on that lawn Saturday, the single mother of three said she's only still functioning because of "the grace of God and wonderful people like this." Around her, dozens of people, tools in hand, hurried to finish up a 28-foot ramp in front of the house and clear a garage. As part of Christmas in April, which has renovated homes for the elderly and disabled for 22 years in Prince George's County, the house was being made wheelchair accessible for Callaham's surviving son, Daniel.

Mary Kucharski, the director of the nonprofit group, said she received a call six weeks ago from Callaham, telling her about the accident and explaining how she had no way to get Daniel into the house.

On April 2, a crew of workers showed up and began building the ramp, expanding doorways and renovating a basement bathroom. Yesterday, they returned with more help, including several elected officials clad in jeans.

It was one of 84 homes in the county that the program renovated Saturday with the help of about 3,500 volunteers.

“I’m just really grateful for everything that’s going on,” Daniel said in a quiet voice as his older sister, Davitta, stood behind him.

He had come home from a rehabilitation hospital just a few days earlier and said he had no doubt his mother would find a way. “I knew she’d get it done.”

Daniel was in the passenger seat when his brother’s car stalled along the Capital Beltway on Jan. 23. Alicie Callaham said David had stepped outside the car — which he’d had just gotten repaired the day before — to flag down help. That’s when another vehicle slammed into the car from behind. In a picture of the wreckage she keeps in a folder, the car is unrecognizable as a vehicle.

Daniel, who was planning to study graphic design at college, was taken to the hospital with a broken neck. David was pronounced dead at the hospital and would later have a funeral attended by 900 people. Daniel, who was still in the hospital and hadn’t been told yet that his brother was dead, did not attend.

“He was the best drummer in the world,” Daniel Callaham said of his older brother, who played drums for local churches and had gone to Berklee College of Music his freshman year on a scholarship.

Daniel said his goal is to walk again, and he summed up his motivation in a word: “Life.”

"Knowing that I'm still here," he said.

As Prince George's County Executive Rushern L. Baker III and Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) passed through the house, talking with the family and taking photos, Alicie Callaham laughed and thanked everyone profusely.

But in quiet moments, she would reflect on how life had changed, how her sons who used to open doors for strangers or rub her feet when they would get swollen, could no longer do that. A cancer survivor, she said she worries about the immediate and the long term: How will she get Daniel around without an equipped van? How can she keep running on three hours' sleep since she doesn't have insurance that covers a home nurse? And what will happen to Daniel if something happens to her?

At the same time, she said, she has faith. She clings to the positive: a neighbor who is a nurse and checks on Daniel, a local caterer who has brought dinners to the family for weeks, the Christmas in April volunteers — and, perhaps the biggest reason for optimism, the sensation that Daniel has recently felt in his legs.

"They told us, 'He will never walk again,' " Callaham said. "They said, 'It will be a miracle if he walks.' I said, 'We believe in miracles.' "